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WASHINGTON -- U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk is a rising star among fellow Republicans and highly respected by House Speaker Dennis Hastert, but his acceptance of the co-chairmanship of a bloc of GOP moderates stands to put him sharply at odds with his party's leaders.

Kirk, of Highland Park, plans to announce Thursday that he and Rep. Charlie Bass (R-N.H.) will head the House Republican Mainstream Tuesday Group, a 35-member bloc that focuses on suburban issues, pushes for stronger environmental regulation and tends to be less conservative on social issues.

Conservative members like Hastert and Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) dominate the House leadership, but because of its slim majority, the party depends on all of its members to push the Republican agenda.

That dependence gives Kirk and the Tuesday group added sway to push their issues if they can stand together as a bloc, something they have been criticized for failing to do in the past.

Under Kirk and Bass, that could change.

"My role is to be a zealous advocate for my constituents, but now also to speak on behalf of the other mainstreamers," he said.

The day before Kirk and Bass were set to take over the group's leadership, moderates were tested within the caucus.

In a voice vote, House Republicans overwhelmingly chose to change their own rules to protect DeLay's leadership position in case he is indicted in Texas on charges of breaking fundraising

laws.

But Kirk and other moderates stood together to support maintaining the current rules, which would have ousted DeLay if he were indicted.

DeLay "is not our ally," Kirk said before the vote, indicating a split with one of the country's most powerful Republicans.

Nevertheless, Kirk praised Hastert and Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) as leaders who will listen to moderate voices.

He also stressed that while the group will fight for the party to maintain fiscal discipline, promote environmental policy and avoid the trenchant social wars, they are not working against the GOP.

"Some political commentators wish we were Democrats, and we are not Democrats," he said.

Hastert's spokesman, John Feehery, said the speaker's open-door policy to the Tuesday group will remain in place and acknowledged that Hastert's respect for Kirk will help the group's message reach the leadership.

"Kirk is someone [Hastert] knows is reasonable and that helps," Feehery said.

At the same time, the speaker is loath to see his caucus split by any internal group and will fight to maintain a cohesive Republican vote in the House, he said.

Joining Kirk in the Tuesday group are fellow Illinois Reps. Ray LaHood and Judy Biggert. Unlike Biggert and Kirk, LaHood opposes abortion rights.

Of the three, Kirk's district along the North Shore is by far the most left-leaning district in Illinois represented by a Republican, and Kirk has long been careful not to alienate Democratic swing voters.

Throughout his career, however, he has served middle-of-the-road interests and still maintained the respect of the right wing.

While his relationship with Hastert might help the Tuesday group gain influence, it could create unrealistic expectations, LaHood said.

"The fact that he and the speaker are both good friends will be helpful to Mark, but it will also put a lot of pressure on him," he said.